

Game designer sees a place to grow (The News Journal)

McNeill Designs aims to become major player

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It's a bit of a cliché, but Delaware native Don McNeill really did have his great idea in the shower.

"There's plenty of word games out there, but there's never been a good sentence game," he said. After that realization, he jumped out of the shower and woke up his wife to explain the idea for a new board game that focuses on building sentences.

His idea is called "You've Been Sentenced!" and since he founded McNeill Designs for Brighter Minds LLC three years ago, the game has grown in popularity and is now sold across the country and internationally, including in Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

"What began as an idea for a game has grown into this company with eight award-winning products," he said. "It's just been a phenomenal ride."

By all accounts, the Wilmington-based company is a Delaware success story.

Besides the original You've Been Sentenced!, McNeill Designs also offers expansion packs, a reworked version of Go Fish called Twisted Fish, and the Readers Digest National Word Power Challenge.

In 2007, their sales topped \$540,000, and McNeill said they expect to hit \$1.5 million this year.

"Sales are just starting to go nuts," he said. "With marketing, we see a real explosion occurring."

As well, McNeill plans to expand the staff from the two full-time worker and one part-timer the company employs now, to around 10 people.

And, he says, the company will soon begin an aggressive advertising campaign.

"Our marketing plans include a million-dollar expenditure on radio and print advertising," he said. The company, which is currently financed by McNeill's family and friends, is working toward gaining some venture capitalists to back the founder's ambitious plans.

In the immediate future, the company plans on releasing more games, including bilingual versions of You've Been Sentenced! and a series of bar and casino games.

As for rival game and toy companies, McNeill doesn't just talk about competing with them.

"I'd like to look at acquiring companies in the future, not just competing," he said.

He explained that, in his experience, it's acquire or be acquired -- and he prefers the former.

McNeill Designs President Martin Uniacke found few problems for Delaware's next governor in promoting entrepreneurs.

He suggested that the governor sign the recent eminent domain bill that would provide protection for businesses, and said the state could possibly do more to help fledgling businesses.

"I'm not aware of any programs that are seed funding and [providing] tax exemptions that are helping a business get off the ground in the beginning," he said.

Overall, however, Uniacke said Delaware fosters an excellent small business atmosphere.

"It is a very business-friendly state," Uniacke said. "We saw that [small business promotion group] First State Innovation got help from Joe Biden, Tom Carper, Mike Castle. Certainly, there's a great show of faith that they want to help the little guy grow into a big guy."

That friendly atmosphere has given McNeill a desire to grow and become a large company.

"In five years I would like to be a major Delaware player," he said. "I believe we could be a billion-dollar player."

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